

The 'King of Torts' Takes a Bride

By Suzanne Gordon

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SONORA, Calif.—Flamboyant trial attorney Melvin Belli—who bills himself as the "King of Torts"—played to a packed court room, including a judge and a jury of his peers, on Saturday to marry 23-year-old Lia Triff of Bethesda, Md. The marriage is the fifth—depending on how you count them (one was annulled)—for the 64-year-old Belli, and the first for his wife.

Belli picked the town of his birth, here in the foothills of California's gold country, as the place for his marriage. The town is famed for its once-a-year, frog-jumping contest and more recently for its invasion by an outlaw motorcycle gang, the Hell's Angels.

Before the ceremony, Belli took his bride on a walking tour, pointing out

places where he had played as a child. Townfolk peered out of windows and shouted greetings to their most famous son. In choosing Sonora, Belli returned also to the site of his first marriage, to celebrate what he insisted will be his last.

"This will be the damnest wedding you've ever seen, and the last one for me," he told guests in the small country courtroom before the ceremony. And to punctuate his commitment to his new bride, he added his own whoop of joy to the final vows, making it clear that his famed use of demonstrative evidence in the courtroom had again stolen the show.

The ceremony itself, conducted by a woman justice of the peace, took no more than five minutes, with only the bride's sister, Mrs. Michael Locke of Dearborn, Mich., in attendance. The

bride's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Triff of Bethesda, were present. They remained, however, inconspicuously in the background and appeared somewhat overwhelmed by all the festivities. Triff is an executive with Savin Business Machines Corp. in Rockville, Md.

The bride, a Fulbright scholar, wore an ivory raw-silk suit and carried a bouquet of sweetheart roses and Sonora daisies. The simplicity of her dress was matched by her husband who had abandoned his famous purple cowboy boots for plain black ones. The bride's dark hair was covered by a Western-style turban, but Belli's shock of grey stood out against his black double-breasted jacket worn with black and white pinstriped bell-bottomed pants.

Mr. and Mrs. Belli posed willingly for photographers

in the law library of the courthouse where Belli pulled a volume from a shelf to give his wife her first lesson in the law.

Mrs. Belli studied art history at the University of Maryland, but will abandon that field to study the law so she can help her husband. "It would give me great satisfaction helping a man as devoted as Mel is to the law," she said.

Belli and his bride met last February at the Kennedy Center. "I was working at the Kennedy Center," said Mrs. Belli, "when Mel and some friends came up to me. I immediately recognized him, but I said to him, 'I know who you are. You're a famous lawyer and your name begins with B. You're F. Lee Bailey.' Mel laughed and we began dating after that."

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BELLI, From B1

After the ceremony two Sonora police cars escorted the Bellis' Rolls-Royce and a caravan of guests to a reception at Pastorini's Loghorn Cafe.

The cast of 104 guests included judges and senators, former California Governor Pat Brown, Belli's 15-year-old son by a previous marriage, entertainers and socialites. "Why do you think all these people came all the way to Sonora for a wedding?" one important guest commented. "It's because of all the favors Belli has done for them."

As the bride and bridegroom arrived at the restaurant, a band dressed in the Italian tricolors greeted them with the wedding march from Aida. The couple received huge goblets of champagne with large strawberries floating inside; pink roses were tied to the stems of the glasses with ribbons.

From then on the wine was endless. Belli chased around the room letting out more whoops of joy, dancing and spilling champagne over some of his guests.

Hugging one of his congratulating admirers, the outspoken Belli said, "You came because you're getting a free Dago meal, and if you came for any other reason I won't respect you."

When the guests had their fill of champagne and hors d'oeuvres, they sat down to eat in a room decorated with crossed Italian and American flags and a five-tier wedding cake. Then came course after course of Italian food, cognac after the soup and, later, plates of chicken served with the wedding cake.

As the meal progressed, ladies retired to the rest rooms to shed their girdles and Belli jumped into the middle of the small dance floor to join guests in the

hora. A young man did a Russian Kazatzka. Refusing to be outdone, Belli did his own imitation and then led the group in more modern dances.

During the celebration he seemed to disprove the theory that age and energy have any correlation, as it was he and not his young bride who did most of the dancing.

Former Gov. Brown delivered the congratulatory speech, claiming that right as the oldest person in the room. "If I were still governor," he told Belli, "I'd appoint you superior court judge."

"You know Pat," Belli retorted, "I always wonder why you have to wait until you're not governor to say that."

Then Belli gave his own wedding speech. "It will be community property from now on," he said. "You know, when I went to sign the marriage license they

asked how many times I'd been married before. Well, when I was married they were all wonderful women."

Turning to his wife he asked, "You all want to say anything honey?" But Mrs. Belli seemed to realize that it was her husband's performance and politely refused.

"I want you all to get a little stoned, and enjoy the beverage," he commanded. The couple then began the task of cutting the huge wedding cake.

After five hours of eating, drinking and dancing, Belli and his bride left for Savannah, Ga., where he will begin a will contest on Monday. The couple planned to travel extensively on their honeymoon, but that will have to wait until Belli's legal schedule permits.

"Lia wants to be a lawyer," he said, "so she will have to learn to live with a fireman putting out fires."